



A NOTE FROM ANGELA:
REMEMBERING
OUR MISSION



THIS MONTH'S THEME:
SEEKING
UNDERSTANDING AS
WRITERS



GET READY FOR OUR
NOVEMBER SESSIONS!

O October/November 2011

WNY Young Writers' *studio*

OCTOBER/NOVEMBER NEWSLETTER

Remembering Our Mission

A Note from Angela

"We believe that all people are born writers and that the act of writing enables us to communicate our needs, raise our voices, connect and learn from others, and heal our lives as well as the world. At Studio, we learn how to honor and support the writer in everyone, because writers make the world a better place."

This afternoon, someone asked me what I love most about Studio. Each time I answer that question, I find myself saying something that's just a little bit different. I like thinking about this. There is so much to love.

Over the last four years, I've had the privilege of getting to know an incredible community of kids and teachers and parents. People often assume that Studio is about what I give to the fellows who join us. They don't often realize how much I've gained from this work I get to do. They don't know how much those words above, taken from our website, mean to me. They don't realize how much joy Studio kids create in my life. They don't understand how much support the teachers and parents there provide me and how inspired I am by the love they have for their children and their work and one another. This theme is woven tightly through the stories they share when we are together.

Those words over there comprise our mission statement. It isn't just a tidy paragraph that articulates an ideal. It's who we are when we learn and write and laugh together at Studio. It's what we hope to achieve over time. It's the difference we hope to make.

When I was asked what I love most about Studio today, I thought of that mission statement. Well, not the statement exactly, but those moments that I get to witness every now and then when someone who was once brand new to Studio but isn't so much anymore starts to ***gets it***.

"So, it's not just about the writing here," they'll say, recognizing all of what we're up to for the very first time and imagining possibilities that I haven't even thought of yet. ***This*** is how we grow. ***I learn from them***. It's not the other way around.

Here's what I know: many of the writers and teachers who join us at Studio are in search of connection. They are passionate about their craft and searching for those whose hearts and minds bend in similar directions.

There are fewer things in life that satisfy me more than knowing that such people exist and that together, we've created this safe space

where risks and mistakes and silliness are celebrated just as often as the hard, slow creation of quality products.

We've come a long way over the last four years, and there is still so much more that we can make happen together. It isn't my job to define what that is. ***It's ours***. My work is about bringing people to the table, figuring out how to open our doors even wider, and ensuring that those who enter feel welcome here and are able to learn and give what they need to.

I've been wondering:
What more we can do to help everyone at Studio communicate their needs better?

How do we help even our youngest and shiest members advocate for themselves?

How can writing heal people? How can we use it to heal our own lives? How can we become a bit of salve for the world?

Writers ***do*** make the world a better place. Studio can too. How do we make that happen? Get ready to share!

At Studio, we study and practice the craft and the process of writing. We also work to develop specific Dispositions of Practice. First identified and articulated by the fellows of Communities for Learning: Leading Lasting Change®, these values, commitments, and practices have a significant influence on the ways we act, the work that we produce, and the learning that we do. We believe that becoming a writer is about much more than the act of writing. As we grow our Dispositions we become writers, and when we become writers, we are able to move through the writing process with greater power. This improves craft.

What are the Dispositions of Practice?

- A Commitment to Seeking Understanding
- Courage and Initiative
- Intellectual Perseverance
- Commitment to Reflection
- Commitment to Expertise
- Collegiality—which *we* define as cooperation and collaboration

More information about the Dispositions can be found online at
Communities for Learning: Leading Lasting Change:
<http://communitiesforlearning.org>

Please subscribe to the Studio blog to receive more frequent updates on
how we are making use of the Dispositions with children and teachers:
<http://wnyyws.org>

**Read on for more personal accounts of what it means to
seek understanding and how Studio writers practice this
Disposition.**

What Does it Mean to “Seek Understanding” as a Writer?

Writers Strive to Understand

- They are curious about what it means to be a writer or to create good writing
- They develop questions about these ideas and work hard to find answers to them
- They talk with others about their curiosities and discoveries in an effort gain varied perspectives
- They do research to learn more

Writers who strive to understand show this through their...	Beginning	Developing	Deepening	Embodying
Learning	<p>Writes in order to complete an assignment</p> <p>Asks questions to clarify directions and expectations around particular assignments</p> <p>Understanding of what it means to be a writer or to create good writing is defined by the teacher and/or grades received on finished products</p>	<p>Writes in order to improve craft, invites peer-review, edits work and makes minor revisions</p> <p>Asks questions to develop an understanding of what good writing is and what good writers do</p> <p>Studies what it means to be a writer and what good writing is, when prompted to by a teacher and/or in order to improve grades</p>	<p>Writes in order to grow as a writer, which improves craft. Revisits certain phases of the writing process in order to make meaningful revisions</p> <p>Asks specific questions that address unique curiosities. Deepening understandings lead to more questions.</p> <p>Studies what it means to be a writer and what good writing is in order to contribute to discussions and support the work of self and others</p>	<p>Examines writing of self and others in order to re-examine and revise previous assumptions about what it means to be a writer or produce good writing</p> <p>Ask questions that highlight gaps in understandings about writing or what it means to be a writer</p> <p>Seeks new information about what good writing is and what it may mean to be a writer. Uses what is learned to improve the work of self and others</p>
Behavior	<p>Agrees that there is much to learn and understand, but spends little time discovering it</p> <p>Criticizes writing and learning based on assumptions and/or misinformation</p>	<p>Studies ideas and information about writing when asked, but isn't ready to apply to own work</p> <p>Is willing to consider different perspectives and the expertise of others</p>	<p>Studies new information and ideas about writing in order to grow as a writer</p> <p>Writer is able to support own beliefs with evidence and remain open and flexible to new ones</p>	<p>Asks others to share their perspectives and understandings and seeks new ideas in order to revise own</p> <p>Promotes own perspectives and beliefs and encourages others to do the same</p>
Work	<p>Relies upon the teacher to provide writing/learning opportunities, structures, process, and strategies</p>	<p>Relies upon new knowledge of the writing process, dispositions, and writer's craft to create unique work</p>	<p>Studies work to define and meet goals as a writer.</p>	<p>Uses writer's process, craft, and dispositions to define new challenges and generate new questions for study</p>



At one point during the summer, I found myself at the library, browsing the nonfiction section as an excuse to avoid taking notes for AP US (which, incidentally, was the whole reason I was at the library in the first place). I was filling my bag with about five or six art history books- none of which I actually ended up reading- when I stumbled upon a book by Francine Prose entitled *Reading Like a Writer: A Guide for People Who Love Books and Those Who Want to Write Them*. I immediately plopped it into my bag, eager to discover what the book had to offer.

I've often heard people compare writing to a sport, wherein, should one wish to improve, one must practice. Therefore, in order to become a better writer, one must write constantly. Makes sense, right? However, some athletes may take this a step further- watching famous plays, studying the lives of successful players, learning from the greats in order to improve their own performance. Logically, then, we can improve our writing even more by learning from the "greats" of our own trade- published authors whose work inspires us.

This was always an interesting concept to me, though one that I never really knew how to go about doing. However, this changed as I read the book. Prose had a really interesting perspective on the subject, challenging her readers to take a look at a piece of writing word by word, sentence by sentence, and so on, in a way that forced you to see how the writing had been crafted, and in what ways that could be applied to one's own work.

The Disposition of seeking understanding is an extremely important one, if occasionally overlooked. It involves developing general curiosity towards writing and discovering ways to learn more about how to become a better writer. How can you develop your abilities as a writer by not writing, though? Obviously, that is a huge part of improvement- one should try to write constantly- but it is not the only part.

For example, I feel as though I am not very good at writing dialogue. It always ends up sounding incredibly fake. I have realized this, and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to improve. In this situation, I could just keep rewriting scenes or give up on the whole thing altogether. Personally, I'm not really a fan of either option. This is where "seeking understanding" comes to play. There are tons of books out there on writing, as well as many websites dedicated to it. I could, as my example above suggests, pick a few books with really believable dialogue and study the ways the author created some specific scene. Most helpful, though, would be finding someone at Studio who I thought was really strong in writing dialogue and ask them for help with it, both in general and with a particular piece.

The Disposition of seeking understanding can be used to help solve a variety of difficulties that you may be facing in your own work, from learning about writing strategies and helpful tips to researching important facts that you may want to incorporate into a piece. It involves taking a step back and looking at who you are as a writer and discovering where you want to be. When you've sorted that out, that's when the real fun begins.

*Need a strategy for seeking
understanding in your own work as a
writer?*

*Consider using multiple models,
mentor texts, and reading with a
writer's eye!*

Read on.....

Conversations with a Parent
about Seeking Understanding:
A Story from Studio

"I'm getting a little bit concerned about my daughter," a mother I know recently confided. "She spends hours in her room working on a novel that she's convinced she will publish one day." I looked at her for a moment, waiting for her to realize what she just said. Then, we both erupted into a fit of laughter, agreeing that there were worse things for a teenager to spend hours doing. This is when she shared her real concern. "I'm afraid that when she shares this with other people, they are going to realize that she basically lifted the plot line."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Her story," she clarified, "it sounds a whole lot like *Twilight*."

I pretended to be shocked. The truth was, at least three of the writers I was working with at the time were composing stories that were heavily influenced by *Twilight*. And the Harry Potter series. And *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. We all stand on the shoulders of giants.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't worry so much about that. In my experience, this is how a lot of writers begin," I explained. "In fact, the first thing I ask kids to do once they've determined what their purposes might be is to go on a treasure hunt and dig up some examples of what they'd like to do."

"You mean you have them read other people's stuff before they write their own?" she asked.

"Yeah, I usually do," I said. "Particularly if they are struggling to start and often when they hit a patch of writer's block once they're drafting. Sometimes, I even suggest they try a write-alike."

"A write-alike?" she laughed. "Do you mean you invite them to practice copyright infringement?"

"Not at all. What I mean is that I ask them to read a lot of the examples of the stuff they want to produce with a good amount of depth before they dive in and find themselves drowning. They need to figure out what the genre is all about, and if they plan to mash different genres or media together, looking at what others have done can provide them a muse or two. They need to see what is possible first. Then, if they are still lacking confidence, I have them pick the writer whose voice or work they like the best, and I have them try to copy-cat them a bit."

"But isn't that wrong?" she asked.

"Not if they are honest about what they are doing, and not if they credit those who inspired them. Using mentor texts and models is not about copying another writer's work. It's about using it to inspire our own ideas, get a feel for what quality could look like, and craft our own plans. This is what many writers do. Much of what we do is a remix."

Try This:

Reading with a Writer's Eye



During our last Studio season, when Andrew, Sam, Matt, and Vincent decided that they wanted to create and publish a field game, their first step involved brainstorming an objective for the game and getting out onto the field to test their instructions as they played the game. This part of the process unfolded easily for them, but their energy waned a bit when it came time to create a written playbook of instructions.

Exploring models helped them persevere through this tough spot.

First, the boys gathered the playbooks and instruction manuals for their favorite games. I brought in some of my own as well. Then, they began defining how they compared and what distinguished them as unique, page by page. Finally, they used their discoveries to create their own graphic organizer for the playbook they would design. Exploring the work of the great game designers who came before them helped them understand what quality could look like, what the essential components of their playbook might need to be, and where they could take greater license with their own ideas.

“We HAVE to make sure we tell people what the objective of the game is,” Vincent explained.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “But I want our playbook to be more interesting than the ones Mrs. Stockman showed us. Can we make people use funny words when they play our game? Can we include a dictionary of them or something?”

“I want our playbook to look like a lightning bolt!” Matt said. “Can we make it fold that way?”

“Uh, I think so,” Vincent said, examining their draft. “But the front HAS to include the name of the game, the age of the players, and something that will make people want to play it. Otherwise, they’ll be confused.”

“It has to be colorful too!” Sam suggested. And they were off.

Locate models and mentor texts that align to your writing interests and the forms you hope to pursue as a writer. Ask the writers you serve to do the same. Model the ways in which you read like a writer as you explore multiple examples of the same form. Show them how to study the following elements, and as they do so, encourage them to consider and share alternative approaches as well. Consider what you would add to this list of prompts as well. They will shift, depending on each writer’s purpose.

- **The way writers hook readers into their texts**
How do they grab their readers’ interest? How do they keep it?
- **The way writers organize, develop, and share their ideas**
What is the purpose of each piece? How does organization support purpose?
What makes the writer’s ideas and the way they organize the text interesting and effective?
How will they connect with their audience? What makes this effective?
- **The way writers help readers navigate their text**
What are the different features of each text, and how do they assist readers in making meaning?
- **The way writers craft word choice, sentence structure, and conventions**
How do these choices establish mood? How do they influence voice?
How do they help readers see and hear and taste and smell and feel the setting, the events, the emotions or the experiences that are conveyed by the writer?
- **Perspective and point of view**
Who is speaking? Why? How would the piece be different if it was told from a different point of view?
- **The use of image, sound, and varied forms of media**
How does purpose influence the way the writer uses these forms? How are they connected? How do transitions between forms occur? What makes this effective?



Books that Help Our Littlest Writers Learn What it Means to Seek Understanding

Consider sharing some of the following picture books with young writers and help them define what this Disposition means.

A Picture Book of Thomas Alba Edison by David Adler

I Know the Moon by Stephen Axel Anderson

Who's the Beast? by Keith Baker

Redwoods by Jason Chin

Phileas' Fortune: A Story About Self-Expression by Agnes De Lestrade

Chicken Little by Rebecca and Ed Emberly

My Life with the Chimpanzees by Jane Godall

Snowflake Bentley by Briggs Martin

Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor by Emily Arnold McCully

There's a Nightmare in my Closet by Mercer Mayer

Duck Rabbit Tom Lichtenheld and Amy Krause Rosenthal

GET READY FOR OUR NOVEMBER SESSIONS!

Please remember to bring:

- Your writer's notebook
(Did you do the one line notebook entry challenge? Can't wait to see who did!)
- Any drafts you are working on
- Your writing folder

ERIE COUNTY: CHEEKTOWAGA CENTRAL SCHOOL: UNION EAST

Grades 1-5: 9-12pm **Grades 6-12:** 1-4pm

September 24th, November 19th, January 21st, March 10th, May 19th

NIAGARA COUNTY: THE KENAN CENTER, LOCKPORT

Grades 1-5: 9-12pm **Grades 6-12:** 1-4pm

September 17th, November 12th, January 14th, March 3rd, May 19th

TEACHERS: PLEASE ARRIVE ONE HALF HOUR PRIOR TO THE START OF YOUR SESSION.

Please let us know if you cannot join us by emailing Angela at
stockmanangela@gmail.com.

Attendance has a significant influence on the way we learn together, our activities, and cost. If you can't come, please let us know so we can plan appropriately!